**Study says students need more career options**

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The current U.S. education system is failing to prepare millions of young adults for successful careers by providing a one-size-fits-all approach, and it should take a cue from its European counterparts by offering greater emphasis on occupational instruction, a Harvard University study published Wednesday concludes.

The two-year study by the Pathways to Prosperity Project at the Harvard University Graduate School of Education notes that while much emphasis is placed in high school on going on to a four-year college, only 30 percent of young adults in the United States successfully complete a bachelor's degree.

While the number of jobs that require no post-secondary education have declined, the researchers note that only one-third of the jobs created in the coming years are expected to need a bachelor's degree or higher. Roughly the same amount will need just an associate's degree or an occupational credential.

"What I fear is the continuing problem of too many kids dropping by the wayside and the other problem of kids going into debt, and going into college but not completing with a degree or certificate,'' said Robert Schwartz, who heads the project and is academic dean of the Harvard Graduate School of Education. "Almost everybody can cite some kid who marched off to college because it was the only socially legitimate thing to do but had no real interest.''

The report highlights an issue that has been percolating among education circles: That school reform should include more emphasis on career-driven alternatives to a four-year education.

The study recommends a "comprehensive pathways network'' that would include three elements: embracing multiple approaches to help youth make the transition to adulthood, involving the nation's employers in things like work-based learning, and creating a new social compact with young people.

Many of the ideas aren't new, and leaders, including President Barack Obama, have advocated for an increased role for community colleges so the country can once again lead the world in the proportion of college graduates.

U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan delivered opening remarks at the report's release in Washington on Wednesday, saying career and technical education has been "the neglected stepchild of education reform.''

"That neglect has to stop,'' Duncan said.

But the idea of providing more alternatives, rather than emphasizing a four-year college education for all, hasn't been without controversy. Critics fear students who opt early for a vocational approach might limit their options later on, or that disadvantaged students at failing schools would be pushed into technical careers and away from the highly selective colleges where their numbers are already very slim.

"Nobody who spends much time in America's high schools could possibly argue that they are focused on college for all, or ever have been,'' said Kati Haycock, president of The Education Trust, a nonpartisan Washington, D.C.-based think tank. "Most schools still resist that idea, instead continuing long-standing, unfair practices of sorting and selecting like an educational caste system — directing countless young people, especially low-income students and students of color, away from college-prep courses and from seeing themselves as 'college material.'''

Schwartz said efforts should be intensified to get more low-income and minority students into selective institutions, while also strengthening the capacity of two-year colleges.

"You've got to work on both fronts at once,'' Schwartz said.

The study recommends that all major occupations be clearly outlined at the start of high school. Students would see directly how their course choices prepare them careers that interest them — but still be able to change their minds. Students should also be given more opportunities for work-based learning, such as job shadowing and internships.

Students, the researchers recommend, should get career counseling and work-related opportunities early on — no later than middle school. In high school, students would have access to educational programs designed with the help of industry leaders, and they'd be able to participate in paid internships.

The report notes that many European countries already have such an approach, and that their youth tend to have a smoother transition into adulthood.